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Debatte

Digital humanities – und wie geht es weiter?
Digital Humanities: And Where Are We Heading?

Literatur

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Paolo Bianchini Let's Tackle it!

Simone Lässig's essay has the great merit of facing the topic of the relationship between digital humanities and the Web 2.0 both from a technical point of view and especially from a cultural perspective. This is very important for historians. In effect, it is not only methods and technologies of digital historiography that impose us to rethink our job. It is also the cultural context of our era, the post-modernity, in which we are immersed. To explain better, I want to ask for help from one of the greatest scholars of our time, Eric Hobsbawm, who, in one of his most famous books, the *Age of Extremes. The Short Twentieth Century*, affirms that our society is more and more focused on the present and has lost the perspective of the past and of the future. It follows that as historians of the era of Web 2.0, we have to undertake not only the past but also the future.

If, on the one hand, we are called to rethink our discipline in the light of a technological revolution that allows us a virtually unlimited access to the sources – at least in theory – and the construction of global networks of historians, on the other hand we have to think about the transmission to posterity of the tracks of our job and, more generally, of our civilization.

Without aspiring to become the guardians of the past, as experts in the historical time, we have to be concerned about how our civilization is related with it. If not, paradoxically, our generation will hand on to future generations only the ruins of the post-industrial economy, while our culture, more and more virtual and ephemeral, runs the risk of disappearing without a trace.

Another epochal issue is mentioned by Lässig: traditionally historians work with one of the three variables of physics: the time. But neoliberalism forces us to take greater account of a new and cumbersome variable: the money. As rightly pointed out by Lässig, digital turning point in humanities costs. More than ever, we have to deal with the economy, either because we work in institutions that have fewer resources or because the research, especially the one that makes use of ICT, has high costs. In the first place, digital humanities require constant updates in the matter of technology and of the contents; in the second place, they need to be worked in groups. This is a paradoxical effect of ICT applied to history: if in private life, especially for digital natives, the web produces very commonly isolation and in some cases even anti-social behaviors, making the social life of the individual only virtual, in the work of historians the Web requires group work.

Moreover digital humanities envisage interdisciplinary teams composed not only by historians, but also by archivists, librarians and computer scientists. In this sense, to economic problems we must add the difficulty of learning to work in groups, which is a whole new challenge in the field of historiography.

Last but not least, contemporary history in general and in particular the digital one has to face with another effect of post-modernity: globalization. One of its most obvious negative effects, as Lässig clearly highlights, is the linguistic homogenization. English is not only the international language, even in the context of scientific communication, but it is also the language of technology. That is why, if normally historians are encouraged to use English in their meetings and in their essays (as in this case), in the Web this is almost compulsory. However, if we flatten on academic English we will lose a fundamental part of the history of our civilization, but mostly we condemn ourselves to express less and less.

It is probable (and desirable) that within a few years applications for simultaneous translation will solve at least in part the problem. But it is undeniable that we have to pay attention to a phenomenon that, associated with the preponderance in the Web of the digital materials produced by the richest societies, especially the Anglo-Saxon ones, risks to delete permanently other cultures, just as rich in history and culture, but not equally able to demonstrate their vitality. At this level the digital divide is clearly visible between the rich and industrialized cultures and the less economically developed ones.

It is clear that all those topics must be taken into account in the education of the younger generations of historians, for which the Web will become a working field of primary importance. That means, on the one hand, to provide future historians the skills for handling ICT as a tool of historiography, on the other hand, for their academic career, to help them to gain recognition for what they have published in digital form.

In short, contrary to what we might think, the job of historian in the era of the Web 2.0 is more complex than it was before. It offers, in addition to new technical and methodological tasks, new ethical and cultural challenges, strictly linked to the life in a globalized world which has big problems with its own historicity. Let's go for it!

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Frederick W. Gibbs

From Theory to Practice in the Digital Humanities

Simone Lässig's engaging and wide ranging essay takes a broad view of the future of digital history, highlighting a number of disciplinary changes that should be on the minds of all historians, regardless of research specialty or career phase. As the digital humanities have come to resemble a kaleidoscope of various disciplines, methods, and projects, it now engenders vastly different responses to the question of how "the digital" will affect "the humanities." One's view of potentially productive ways forward varies tremendously with even subtle shifts in perspective. To hopefully complement the well-nourishing food for thought that Lässig has provided us, I'd like to offer a slightly different take on a few points; most of her excellent analysis I pass over in silence because all I could do is nod vigorously in agreement. Beginning with a dose of a healthy skepticism as an antidote to the utopian digital kool-aid hocked by new media evangelists, Lässig rightfully warns that it can be all too easy to "give our unconditional and enthusiastic assent to all the innovations they entail." Right on. Media revolutions are hardly new, she points out, and they are never what their pundits predict they will be. Lässig encourages us, then, "to rein in the sense of living in an age of media revolution which seems to have gripped a large number of scholars in the field." Besides, when we take a longer view of the digital humanities phenomenon, she reminds us that "historians' interest in and engagement with digital research practices and academic communication formats is no 'new' phenomenon." Lässig highlights digital continuity by noting historians' early use of listservs.

Lässig's comparison raises an important question: To what extent are digital humanities about modernizing existing or traditional practices, and to what extent does it lead to different kinds of activities altogether? The answer holds important implications for how we might (or not) reshape professional training and practices. It seems that digital humanities scholars have often motivated their methods in terms of novelty. Indeed, many of the digital possibilities at hand for both research and dissemination have no analog counterparts. At least in terms of academic humanities – considering the amount of digitized historical sources, data, and tools for researching history at fundamentally new scales, creating dynamic and reusable research platforms, and communicating to a broad audience immersed in a sea of global, participatory media – perhaps we actually *are* living in an age of media revolution

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Debatte

- Digital humanities – und wie geht es weiter?
Digital Humanities: And Where Are We Heading?

Kolumne

- Marta Maria Chagas de Carvalho
An Experimental Pedagogy Laboratory in São Paulo, Brazil (1914)

Vorschau auf 2-2015

„Since the late 1960s educational scientists and even historians of education have shown little interest in the role of religion ... The reasons for this development are easily explained. On the one hand, religious education became a special research area for theologians and religious education teachers. On the other hand, most educational scientists became believers in the secularization thesis. This thesis states that religion has lost its authority in all aspects of economic, aesthetic, social, and political life. Following this rationale, researchers became blind to the transformation of religion in modern societies.“ (David Kaebisch)